

Perceptions of Turkish EFL Students on Online Language Learning Platforms and Blended Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of EFL students studying English at the School of Foreign Languages, Anadolu University (AUSFL) on blended language learning and online learning platforms. The participants of the study consisted of 167 students whose English language proficiency level was B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). A questionnaire adapted from Owston, York and Murtha (2013) was used in the study.

After application of the questionnaire, ten randomly selected students were interviewed about their perceptions of blended learning. Applying statistical and content analysis of the interviews provided a deeper understanding of students' perceptions. Statistical analysis showed that students liked the idea of blended learning in terms of course format and attendance. Analysis of the interviews in terms of content revealed that students liked the flexibility of online learning, but preferred face-to-face communication with a teacher and classmates. In terms of their ideas about the online platforms of course books, their ideas varied. The students were mostly positive about using online language learning platforms. Even though the aim of the study was to get the perceptions of students, interviews were carried out with 5 teachers about students' mid-term and final exam scores to get an idea if engaging in blended learning helped them learn better. Based on the results, certain implications were drawn from the study in order to organize future teaching at the AUSFL and implement a teaching environment utilizing blended language learning.

Keywords: blended learning, face-to-face learning, interactive learning environments, media in education, online learning

1. Introduction

Internet technologies have inevitably become part of professional, academic, individual and commercial life. In particular, the use of Internet technologies in education has spread in recent years. Through the emergence of Internet technologies, face-to-face education has been supported with online learning and traditional methods have been transferred to online platforms since using online technologies in foreign/second language learning affects learning positively, enabling students to encounter authentic visual and interactive materials and to listen to native speakers. "Students believe that using interactive technologies helps them to increase learning productivity, encourage a deeper approach to learning, promote the development of communication skills, and improve their understanding of course content" (Kember et al., 2010). As Mayer (2011) states, the combination of verbal and visual information presented in multimedia environments is not only appealing for learners, but also facilitates the processing of large amounts of information by addressing multi-sensory modes. Students can interact with their peers and teachers as well as other language learners throughout the world. Thus, their learning becomes more permanent and entertaining, and they become more autonomous, having control over their learning process. Supporting student-centered learning, these environments also help teachers to evaluate their students instantly and to give feedback (Aydin, 2014).

AUSFL provides intensive English language education to students who are enrolled in various departments at Anadolu University. The students are given a placement test at the beginning of the term and, if they score 60 or above, they take a proficiency exam which aims to test their language proficiency in four language skill areas. Students whose scores are over 70 by-pass AUSFL Preparatory School and may start studying in their own faculties.

These levels are determined according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and namely they were A, B1, B1.1, B1.2, B2.1 and B2 levels. The passing level from preparatory class is B2.2. Student learning is enhanced through the online platforms of course books that integrate all the language skills. Students can access extra study materials, listen to podcasts, watch videos, engage in grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing exercises, all of which support their face-to-face classroom learning. They receive input not only in class, but also outside of class. Therefore, a blended syllabus is followed by the institution.

2. Brief Review of the Literature

The number of Internet users has increased considerably and Internet technologies have become an important part of our lives, especially for young people. Through the introduction of the World Wide Web, server-based Learning Management Systems (LMS) have replaced computer based education software, so formation and control of content have been upgraded to web based software programs (Firat & Yurdakul, 2013). “The terms Content Management Systems (CMS), Learning Management System (LMS) and Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) have emerged and social web applications, such as friendship sites, wikis, blogs, and video sharing platforms have appeared as second-generation Internet services” (Firat & Yurdakul, 2013, p. 16).

Language learning has also been affected by latest technological developments, and teaching has extended over the boundaries of classroom teaching. As Seljan, Banek Zorica, Spiranec and Lasic-Lazic (2006) state, using new technologies in language teaching has infinite potential, and language learning necessitates the use of new technologies more than any other social science discipline (Kartal, 2005). The use of new technologies has converted traditional face-to-face language learning classes into virtual classes.

“Learner participation and interaction is important in successful language learning, whether it is face-to-face, blended, or fully online, and it is believed that greater participation in course communication results in students experiencing greater cognitive and explanatory learning” (Sun, 2014; Paskey, 2001). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has been put forward as a powerful environment for collaborative learning across the globe by Grooms (2003) and is applied by the teachers both synchronous (teachers and students communicating at the same time) and asynchronous (different students dealing with the same content at different times), into their classrooms. Learners of today are observed to manage, evaluate their own learning and provide self-feedback so they have a high level of communication (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010).

According to Fee (2009), students are more computer literate than their teachers nowadays, preferring to access information using the Internet. Thus, the aim of education in this digital age is to provide students the opportunity to reach information quickly and accurately and to help them to analyze and evaluate information in a right way by using online tools.

Online platforms that include many exercises, as well as voice or video chat, enable students to use the target language in a written or oral manner in different environments so that structures are recorded in their long-term memory and become automatic. Hence, the learners become more fluent in speaking and writing (Altunay, 2011).

2.1 Blended Learning

The blended learning model has been used since 2002, and it can be defined as a combination of face-to-face and online learning (Graham, 2006). For Thorne (2002) “blended learning is a mixture of traditional classroom teaching and online learning, virtual classes, voice messages, e-mail, tele-conferencing, online written texts and videos” (p. 80).

There have been many studies on blended learning. It is defined as the combination of useful aspects of online and face-to-face learning environments, where students and teachers interact both with and without the use of technology (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Tselios, Daskalakis, & Papadopoulou, 2011). “Effective blended learning plays on the strengths of face-to-face and online learning, combining the best of both approaches, to facilitate the best learning outcomes for students” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

According to Owston et al. (2013) blended learning can save instructional time used in face-to-face learning and it offers many advantages to institutions, faculty, and students by enhancing interaction between teachers and students.

“With regard to student satisfaction, an overwhelming body of research demonstrates that students have greater satisfaction with blended courses, compared with both traditional face-to-face or fully online modes of education since students can not only benefit from increased time and spatial flexibility for their study, wider and easier

access to learning resources, and a higher level of autonomy in regulating their learning but also they can communicate directly with faculty and, in case they need it, to receive immediate support and guidance” (Owston et al., 2013, p. 38).

2.2 Previous Studies

There have been a number of studies on blended learning. A number of the studies compare the success rate of learners who take face-to-face, online and blended courses, while others try to reveal student perceptions. Having carried out a study with learners who take face-to-face, online and blended courses on their success, Dziuban et al. (2004) found that the success rates of students who only take online courses were low, whereas the success rates of the blended learning groups were high.

After conducting a study at an urban university involving 577 students on student perceptions and their course achievements, Owston et al. (2013) conclude “high achievers are greatly satisfied with a blended format, find blended learning to be convenient and flexible, are extremely engaged in their studies, and appear to learn key concepts better” (p. 43). In terms of low achievers, they claim that low achievers may need the structure that comes from regular (e.g., weekly) face-to-face classes, as they may not have the independent study skills that blended learning demands.

Sagarra and Zapata (2008) examined student perceptions regarding the learning of a foreign language in an instructional environment that combined face-to-face meetings with weekly online homework. The results of the survey on student perceptions indicated “most students had easy access to the online environment and workbook and acknowledged a mutual relationship between class content and online materials, stating that the electronic workbook helped them learn the target language. Students in their study were found to acknowledge a mutual relationship between class content and online materials. They liked having multiple attempts, receiving immediate feedback, working at their own pace, and having access to the correct answers after submitting their work, as well as enjoying activities that use a myriad of formats, which are accompanied by images, and that allow them to work within the online learning environment” (Sagarra & Zapata, 2008, p. 219).

3. Aim

The aim of this study is to obtain EFL students’ ideas about online platforms that they used during their education at AUSFL in the 2013-2014 academic year, as well as their perceptions of blended learning. EFL student perceptions of blended language learning are unexplored in the literature, since online language learning is a recent concept in language education. An understanding of this relationship will be beneficial for language education institutions aiming to embed blended learning in their curriculum and plan their curriculum.

This study tries to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are B2.2 level students’ perceptions of blended learning?
- 2) What are their ideas regarding the online components of the course books?
- 3) What kind of activities would they prefer to have in an online platform?

4. Methodology

Participants of this study were 167 B2.2 level English language learners at the School of Foreign Languages, Anadolu University. At the beginning of the fall term, the students took a proficiency exam. If achieved a score of 70 or above, they had a right to study in their departments. If not, they studied English until they reach B2.2 level and achieved 70 in the final exam. The questionnaire used in the study was developed and administered by the researcher towards the end of the spring term. The questionnaire was based on items drawn from student surveys of the Cook, Owston, and Garrison (2004) COHERE study (Owston et al., 2013). In the questionnaire, there were eight questions apart from personal questions in the first part. Of these eight questions, two were open-ended and six were multiple-choice questions. Furthermore, ten randomly selected students were interviewed regarding their perceptions on blended learning in order to get a more detailed account of their impressions of the lesson format. The interviews were semi-structured and the students were shown the frequencies of the questions related to the course format preferences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

In an analysis of the data, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. The data regarding the multiple choice questions were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and the frequencies were computed. The researcher and another grader examined the interview transcripts, detecting emerging issues. The inter-rater reliability was found to be .85.

5. Results

In the first part of the questionnaire, there were questions related to the students' ages, gender, whether they were repeating the preparatory year, which levels they had repeated, and how many years they had studied English in Preparatory School. A total of 167 students responded to the questions. Of these 167 students, 71 were female and 96 were male. 22 of students were aged 18, 65 were 19, 50 were 20, 27 were 21 and 3 were over 21 years of age.

Table 1. The number of students who repeated the levels

LEVELS	NUMBER
A	5
B1.1	15
B1.2	21
B2.1	46
B2.2	-
TOTAL	87

In terms of repeating the levels, 87 students indicated that they had repeated certain levels and 80 of them had not failed in the levels before they had reached B2.2 level.

In order to answer the first research question, students were asked multiple-choice questions on their preferences regarding face-to-face, online and blended learning. The responses of the students indicate that 68% prefer a blended course format (n=114), 28% prefer a face-to-face format (n=46) and only 7 prefer an entirely online course format (4%). When students were asked about attending courses, 50% of the students' preferences were again for a blended course format (n=82), 40% preferred face-to-face courses (n=67) and only 16 preferred accessing videos of lessons (10%). However, their preferences differed when they were asked about participating in discussions. 57% of the students preferred participating in face-to-face discussions (n=92), 34% preferred a combination of face-to-face and online discussions (n=57) and only 15 preferred participating in online discussions (9%). In order to discover if gender has an effect on preference, means and standard deviations were calculated and the responses were compared. No significant difference in terms of gender was found ($r=.489$, $p<0.01$).

Table 2. Student preferences of different learning environments

Course format preferences	Number	Percentage %
If the same course is offered in different formats, which course format would you prefer?		
A. Entirely face-to-face course format	46	28
B. Blended course format	114	68
C. Entirely online course format	7	4
If you had a choice between attending courses face-to-face or accessing lessons online, which would you choose?		
A. Attending lessons face-to-face	67	40
B. Accessing online downloadable videos of lessons	16	10
C. A combination of both	84	50
If you had a choice between participation in classroom discussion or online discussion, which would you choose?		
A. Class discussion	95	57
B. Online discussion	15	9
C. A combination of both	57	34

In order to obtain a more detailed picture of students' preferences, ten randomly chosen students were also interviewed regarding their choices. Most of the students preferred face-to-face communication because of communicating with teachers. They preferred face-to-face contact in order to establish positive interpersonal relations with teachers to build knowledge and to ask questions. They stated that teachers were facilitators of knowledge and they could not imagine language courses without teachers. Although they liked to keep track of their own studies in online learning, they wanted to receive feedback from teachers on their progress. However, they stated that they appreciated the fast exchange of information by means of online communication. They said that they preferred instant feedback regarding their homework. In terms of attendance, most of the students preferred a blended learning environment, since they stated having difficulty in attending classes and liked the flexibility of online learning.

The students were asked to write their ideas regarding the online components of their course books, in order to answer the second research question. All of the responses were analyzed and some emerging themes were found. These were positive and negative ideas, technical issues and also recommendations. The names of the books and online platforms were kept confidential in order not to favor or endorse the material. Emerging ideas are as follows:

Negative ideas

It is boring and it requires memorization.

We find the answer key of the exercises and it is of no use.

It is not successful.

It is like a game.

It is not fair.

It is not necessary.

It is tiring.

It is not suitable for this age group.

Some students do not have Internet access, and if it is conducted outside school, it cannot be efficient because of time constraints and irregularities.

It is challenging.

It is boring because it is homework.

It is good preparation for exams, but is not related to daily language use.

Positive ideas

It is a successful system.

It is beneficial for students.

I find it very successful because it is a different kind of learning that goes beyond traditional education.

If done in a disciplined way, it can make learning easy.

Recommendations

There should be no time limit.

It should be carried out as extra activity and should not be graded.

It should not be given as homework, its aim should be to teach.

It should be graded, but only as a nominal component.

There should be more speaking activities.

Listening parts and videos should not be too long.

Topics should be from real life.

Assignments should not be too lengthy.

It should not be compulsory.

There should be more games and activities. It should be so entertaining that students want to enter the system by themselves.

There should be more activity types.

Students should not be forced to do the activities.

There should be tracking, and individual feedback should be given by teachers.

It should be done for the sake of improving and learning, not for grades.

There should be more reading texts and questions.

Answers of exercises should not be available on the Internet.

It should be more interesting.

There should be more online studies, so students can follow the lessons online.

Online studies should support classroom teaching and should be conducted by the students at the same time.

Technical issues

Materials are not bad, but the system has problems, there are errors in certain exercises and there is too much emphasis on punctuation.

One of the online platforms used with the students, apart from the online components of their course books was Edmodo. Edmodo is a social learning platform in which learners and teachers post assignments, embed videos, form learning groups, post quizzes, and create a calendar of events and assignments. Students can also upload assignments for their teachers to view and grade. Teachers can give instant feedback to students' assignments. Edmodo helps teachers to track their students' progress and to connect with them to continue classroom discussions online (<http://www.edmodo.com>). Students were very positive about this application. Emerging ideas were as follows:

It is very entertaining, encouraging and effective.

It is beneficial because the teacher decides the type of homework.

I do it myself.

It leads to success because we choose the activities.

I do it willingly.

It is more entertaining if the teacher is interested.

I learn a lot of new things.

In order to answer the third research question, students were asked what kind of activities they would prefer in an online system. They were required to check the activity types. All the responses were calculated with the frequencies being found and ranked. Their responses are as follows:

Table 3. The kind of activities students prefer in an online system

Activity types	frequency	%
vocabulary	128	76.6
exam preparation	114	68.3
grammar	100	59.9
speaking	85	50.9
tests	84	50.3
reading	81	48.5
pronunciation	74	44.3
writing	59	35.3
games	58	34.7

As Table 3 reveals, the students mostly preferred vocabulary activities, tests and grammar activities in an online platform. This may be due to their proficiency exam. The students may have preferred to prepare for this exam and therefore preferred grammar, exam preparation and vocabulary activities.

In AUSFL online components of course books are graded and they account for 10% of students' mid-term grades. In terms of grading, students were asked if they thought online studies should be graded. 85 of the students stated that online studies should be graded, 79 stated they should not be graded and 3 said they were undecided.

6. Discussion

As the first part of this study reveals, most students favored a blended course format, in other words, they preferred to attend both face-to-face and online courses. In terms of participation in classroom discussion or online discussion, they mostly preferred class discussions. This may be due to their perception of the role of the teacher in a language class. Students may see the teacher as a facilitator of the acquisition of knowledge and they are used to seeing the teacher as the authority in class. Students in AUSFL have been observed to prefer receiving explicit feedback for their work. Conducting a study on student preferences of online or face-to-face learning, Paechter and Maier (2010) found "students preferred a choice of communication modes, including face-to-face communication for interaction with a tutor. They also appreciated the rapid exchange of information by means of online communication, e.g., the possibility of obtaining immediate feedback regarding assignments" (p. 296). The findings of this study also support Paechter and Maier's (2010) findings. Students in our study favored face-to-face communication in order to establish positive interpersonal relations with teachers, possibly believing this enhances their learning.

Students in this study also pointed out that they worked more independently on course assignments in online study, but stated that they liked blended learning, enjoying both the environment (synchronous or asynchronous) and having face-to-face interaction with a teacher and their classmates. Owston et al. (2013) stated that there is a correlation with having good marks and preferring blended learning. They claimed "students with high marks are greatly satisfied with a blended format, find blended learning to be convenient and flexible, are engaged in their studies, and appear to learn key concepts better" (p. 44).

In terms of their ideas about the online components of course books, students had both positive and negative feedback. Some thought that the exercises were given as homework, and they did not like doing homework. Instead, some preferred to do the work in class with their classmates and teachers, asking questions when they needed help. Negative ideas may stem from student beliefs and attitudes towards language learning, since they have traditionally studied languages in a formal classroom setting where the teacher was the only authority. Online language learning is a recent phenomenon and students may have only encountered it at university and had difficulty getting used to student-centered learning, since learner autonomy is a foreign concept in the Turkish education system. Nissen and Tea's (2012) study reveals similar ideas. Conducting a study with seven language teachers on how second generation tutors within blended learning courses link face-to-face and online course modalities, Nissen and Tea (2012) found that most tutors insist on limited student involvement in the online parts of their blended learning courses.

The findings of this study also parallel Sagarra and Zapata's (2008) study. Conducting a study with 245 Spanish L2 learners, Sagarra and Zapata (2008) found "students enjoyed employing multiple attempts, receiving individual immediate feedback, being able to work at their own pace, and consolidating class content in online language learning" (p. 220).

Even though the aim of the study was to get the perceptions of students, interviews were carried out with 5 teachers about students' mid-term and final exam scores to get an idea if engaging in blended learning helped them learn better. Teachers stated that the students who got higher scores in the activities and tests in online learning platforms and Edmodo also performed well in mid-term and final exams. Students' scores in mid-term exam and final exams were looked at holistically with the teachers. Unfortunately, no statistical analysis was carried out on students' scores who did all the activities in Edmodo and online learning platforms to find out if blended learning had an effect on their scores. This finding is in line with Dziuban et al. (2004) and Owston et al. (2013) who stated that success rates of the blended learning groups are higher than the rates of students who only took online courses. Students in this study can be said to benefit from blended learning although there are many variables affecting success in learning a foreign language.

7. Conclusion

Considering the findings of this study, a blended language learning design that combines the advantages of online learning and face-to-face learning appears to be admirably suitable for AUSFL. The students in this study favored face-to-face learning for interaction with their peers and teachers, whereas they favored online learning when they wanted instant feedback and to study at their own pace. Curriculum planners should take this issue into consideration when planning future syllabuses in which they combine online and face-to-face learning.

Teacher training appears to be an important issue since teachers are still key elements in language learning. Curriculum planners and administrators should reconceptualise the roles of both teacher and learner and how they construct understanding through synchronous and asynchronous online interaction (Comas-Quinn, 2011). Teachers at AUSFL receive training in online learning at different levels and times throughout the year, and all teachers are encouraged to attend these training sessions. According to Comas-Quinn (2011) “teachers can focus on improving their skills and an understanding of online teaching and learning and, rather than being teachers who reluctantly use technology to comply with institutional requirements, they are supported on their journey to become online teachers for whom the technology opens up new pedagogical opportunities” (p. 230).

In terms of to what extent face-to-face and online learning is applied, Waha and Davis (2014) state “there is not a ‘right blend’ of online and face-to-face learning, the ‘right blend’ is different for each student, dependent on their learning style and circumstances” (p. 179). The “right blend” also varies across different content areas, with different proportions of online and face-to-face learning being appropriate for different subjects (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008). Curriculum planners and teachers should also take the different learning styles of students into consideration when planning syllabuses. Moreover, they should encourage and train students to be more autonomous learners.

8. Suggestions

The results of this study should not be generalized, since the study was carried out with only B2.2 level students (n=167). More reliable and general results would have been obtained if the study had been carried out with students from all levels of language learning proficiency. Students’ grades in the online components of the course and their scores in the exams would be compared by applying statistical analysis. Moreover, their preference of course formats could have been compared with their success levels. Future studies could compare students’ preferences and their success rates. Future studies might also compare the perceptions of successful and unsuccessful students in regard to blended learning and their achievement. Moreover, the perceptions and achievement of students in a blended course and a traditional face-to-face course could also be compared.

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